

# The Blindside Flick: Race and Rugby League

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## Abstract

The issue of race was virtually beyond the touchline in Australian rugby league before the 1960s. It was a white man's game. Institutionalised racism meant that few Aboriginal men played rugby league at the highest professional level. It is now presumed that race and racism have no place in a game where these questions have been historically 'out of bounds'. The dearth of critical writing in rugby league history indicates that racism in the sport has been subject to a form of social blindness and deemed unworthy of study. Rugby league's white exclusionist past and the denial of racism in the present era indicate habits of mind that may be described in league argot as the 'blindside flick'.

Until the contemporary era of rugby league in Australia, the 'blindside flick' was a pass to a player who would almost inevitably be forced over the sideline by the opposing team. It was a pass of no consequence, a manoeuvre to be avoided or ignored. Fans of rugby league usually viewed such a pass with dismay. In recent years, however, the blindside flick has been successfully deployed by teams possessing players with speed, agility, creativity and vision. Nevertheless, it remains a marginal tactic that is absent from most coaching manuals. The evolution of the blindside flick may be seen in broad terms as a metaphor for the issue of race throughout the history of the code of rugby league. Until the 1960s, only a small number of talented Aborigines had been given an opportunity to play at the highest level in Australian rugby league. From that decade onward, the number of Indigenous players amongst Australia's representative team and the nation's professional clubs has increased markedly. In more recent years, there has even been a statistical 'overrepresentation' of Aboriginal rugby league players within these teams (Hallinan and Judd 2009, p. 1222). This paper discusses the changing manifestations of racism in Australian rugby league and questions whether a different form of racism has evolved along with the game in its contemporary form.

Within Australia, racism in sport has not been solely confined to the code of rugby league. Beyond rugby league, successful Aboriginal men and women in a range of sports have continually confronted a racist paradox. Their acceptance is dependent upon them being considered like other non-Indigenous Australians, even as their Aboriginality is emphasised. Their sporting successes, along with their failures, are often viewed in terms of a racist paradigm (Godwell 2000). They are praised for their extraordinary sporting abilities or damned for their enigmatic unpredictability by coaches, the

media and sports fans. As Bob Moore has noted, 'Each positive outcome for Indigenous athletes is treated as an anachronism. Each negative acts as a metonymic descriptor for the entire Indigenous community' (2008, p. 73). The abilities and achievements of Aboriginal athletes in Australia are often evaluated in implicitly racist terms.

Indeed, the realm of sport appears to be one of the few remaining arenas where race 'science' still has some cogency. John Hoberman's 1997 study, *Darwin's Athletes*, revealed that sport in the United States remained largely informed by a racist ideology, including notions that align race with aptitudes in specific sports. Differences in sporting ability have been ascribed to supposed racial 'characteristics', such as the idea that evolution has endowed black athletes with a 'monkey muscle' that enhances their running ability (Hoberman 1997). Similarly narrow ideas have been expressed in the contemporary Australian context, for example, by the former cricketer Dennis Lillee, who has described with admiration the 'fast twitch muscles' of Indigenous football players (Hallinan and Judd 2009, p1227). The implications of such ideas are considerable, as they have the potential to reinforce racial stereotypes and divisions. Bob Moore (2008, p. 73) has explored these implications with regard to Aboriginal rugby league players in Australia:

White players could rest assured that the Aboriginal players did not have more ability than them, they simply had better genes. When the performances of Aboriginal athletes did not match their theoretical goals, they were marked as lazy. The evidence was reconstructed to fit the hypothesis, and Indigenous athletes were placed in an invidious position: if they succeeded in their chosen sport, it was the result of genetics; if they failed to succeed, they lacked the requisite drive and purpose.

It is perhaps evidence of the evolution of racism itself that the language used to link race and sport can be subtle, almost inadvertent and, at times, even sound positive. It is customary to hear Australian rugby league commentators emphasise an Aboriginal player's 'natural ability'. Regardless of whether or not this constitutes a new form of unintentional racism, the result, as in the past, is that it serves to emphasise differences and divisions along racial lines. The complexities of race in contemporary Australian sport have been explored by Chris Hallinan and Barry Judd in relation to the Australian Football League (AFL). These authors have applied the theories of 'enlightened racism' and 'inferential racism' to demonstrate that a racialised logic often underpins both positive and negative appraisals of Indigenous AFL players (Hallinan and Judd 2009).

On the question of analysing and understanding racism, Gillian Cowlishaw (1986, p. 22) has argued that:

The way physical, cultural or other differences between groups are related to domination, exclusion, exploitation and inequality is an historical question. Theories

of racism that continue to reify race and to ignore the particular ways that racial boundaries and definitions are created will remain inadequate.

Racism within the code of rugby league in Australia is historical, following the trajectory of the racism that permeated Australian society. From white settlement in 1788, the nation's Aboriginal people were dispossessed, marginalised and segregated on reserves. Australia's Indigenous population was denied even the most basic citizenship rights until 1967. Aborigines were seen as objects in the gallery of race science and social Darwinism. They were initially expected to simply 'die out'. A prevailing 'logic' about degrees or levels of blackness led to the removal and institutionalisation of many lighter-skinned Aboriginal children.

Until the 1960s, the code of rugby league reflected Australian attitudes and values by virtually excluding Aboriginal people from playing at a high level in what was then a white men's game. Only a few of the most outstanding Aboriginal footballers were given an opportunity to play in white teams before that decade. One researcher, David Huggonson views the sport of rugby league as an outlet that helped to overcome the problems created within Australian society by racism. Huggonson has attempted to trace Aboriginal participation in Queensland rugby league from 1908 to 1958. He believes that black Queensland players helped to 'break the barriers of racial prejudice' (Davis 2008). In Queensland, the 1897 Aboriginal Protection Act had segregated Indigenous people onto reserves such as Cherbourg and Palm Island, a policy that lasted well into the 1960s. Rugby league had a presence on these reserves, with many of the communities forming their own rugby league teams.

Nevertheless, as Huggonson acknowledges, the sport of rugby league could not transcend the barriers of structural racism. Huggonson highlights the case of one Aboriginal footballer, Frank Fisher (grandfather of Olympian Cathy Freeman), who was selected to play against a touring Great Britain side (Davis 2008). The British were so impressed by him that their manager suggested to Fisher that he go and play professional football in England. That was not possible at that time because he was constrained by the Aborigines Protection Board and not being seen as a 'citizen' he would never have been granted a passport (Fagan 2008). Few Aboriginal footballers were permitted to reach the representative level attained by Frank Fisher in that era. In 1937, Arthur Kurrie, who played for the Tweed Heads' 'All Blacks' team, (the first all-Aboriginal team in a local competition), was selected as a member of the New South Wales Country squad which defeated the City side (Fagan 2008). Between the late 1930s and the mid-1940s, the Indigenous Johnson brothers from Currabubula near Tamworth played for Canterbury, South Sydney and the New South Wales Country representative side (Tatz 1995, pp. 188-193).

For rugby league in Australia, the decade of the 1960s has been viewed as a turning point in race relations within that sport (Tatz 1995, p. 199). Prior to the late 1960s, very few Aboriginal men played at the highest levels of rugby league and only a handful played for Australia, including Eric Simms, Lionel Williamson, Larry Corowa, Lionel Morgan and Arthur Beetson (Stoddart 1986, pp. 167-169). From the 1960s to the present, a growing number of young Aboriginal men have played rugby league at the professional level. Nevertheless, their involvement with that football code has largely been limited to their participation as players. The high level of Indigenous participation on the field has not been mirrored in the off-field facets of the game, such as administration, coaching or refereeing. Of former Indigenous rugby league players from professional clubs, Arthur Beetson remains one of the few who has had a career as a coach and been appointed as a selector of the Australian representative team. Roy Masters, a journalist and former football coach, suggests that Beetson, unlike other black footballers, was ‘brash, aggressive and unyielding’ on and off the field. Perhaps it was these qualities, as well as his talent as a player, that ensured Beetson would not be given the blindside flick (Tatz 1995, p. 204).

Heidi Norman has explored how the New South Wales Rugby League Aboriginal Knockout competition emerged out of the late 1960s and early 1970s as an expression of both cultural resistance and Indigenous identity, in an effort to break the mould of assimilation. Aboriginal men and women formed teams all over New South Wales – in the towns of Walgett, Moree, Kempsey, La Perouse, Dubbo, Bourke, Maitland, Nambucca Heads. Links were formed between these towns throughout the state, and by the strength of organising within their communities the towns were able to stage a knockout competition. There was even some discussion of an Aboriginal team being created to be part of the national competition, but it was never seriously considered by the governing body of the code. The black Knockout competition was a demonstration of Aboriginal people creating a game of their own despite difficult circumstances. It wasn’t simply about football; it was about family, community and celebrating their Aboriginality (Norman 2006, pp. 169-186).

Similarly, Jackie Hartley’s study of the role of rugby league in Redfern has emphasised the social significance of the game. Hartley has explained that young Indigenous men in Redfern formed the All Blacks rugby league team not only to collectively escape the depressed social conditions that they lived in, but more importantly to forge a distinctive Indigenous identity that defied the prevailing notion of assimilation. The formation of the All Blacks rugby league team was also assisted by the Australian Communist Party, which had an association with a number of the players. The existence of the All Blacks team became an example through sport of cultural resistance (Hartley 2002, pp. 149-171).

Although the establishment of the Aboriginal Knockout competition in New South Wales and the formation of Redfern's All Blacks team appear to be evidence of the empowerment of the Indigenous population via the avenue of rugby league, some doubts remain about a game that has a lengthy racist history. The problem of racism in rugby league was exposed by Anthony Mundine on his departure from the St George team. Mundine did not comply with what appears to be demanded by the code: a silence on the issue of racism. In 1998, the St George five-eighth accused the Canterbury forward, Barry Ward, of calling him a 'black c..t'. Ward was fined \$10,000 by the judiciary, which reduced the sum to \$5,000 on appeal (Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission 2006, p. 139).

Reflecting on that incident, Anthony Mundine (Pramberg 2009) has stated:

People have to understand how brutal racial vilification can be... It can have a brutal mental effect on the person being abused.

Fines have not been the sole outcome of such incidents. In 2005, Bryan Fletcher, a South Sydney player, was replaced as the team's captain after he racially vilified Indigenous footballer, Dean Widders, from the Parramatta club (Honeysett 2009). A refusal to tolerate racist abuse has emerged, too, in other Australian football codes. Australian Football League players Michael Long and Nicky Winmar were arguably the most prominent Aborigines to reject racism within that sport. Racial abuse continues to be an often unrecognised form of provocation within Australian sport (McNamara 1998, pp. 85-109).

In the game of rugby league, some Aboriginal footballers have acknowledged their reluctance to complain about the racist jibes to which they were subjected. Former Brisbane Broncos player, Steve Renouf, (Malone and deKroo 2008) stated in relation to the worst racial abuse he encountered: I thought it was no big deal because the bloke who said it, I actually get along with him. I didn't make a deal of it afterwards. Another retired Brisbane Bronco, Gordon Tallis, (Malone and deKroo 2008) said: Unfortunately, racism is nothing new. I remember that when I was playing the 'monkey' chants were not uncommon.

Racist taunts and insults have not only been directed at rugby league players of Aboriginal descent. Fijian-born Penrith player, Petero Civoniceva, was racially abused during a match in July 2008 by fans of the opposing Parramatta team, who referred to him as a 'monkey'. Civoniceva (Read 2008) described the incident:

They were saying 'You're a monkey, why don't you get back in your tree'. That's why I took offence to it. I can get over being called 'You black so and so'. I have heard that since I was a kid playing footy.

In a game in May 2009, Cronulla captain, Paul Gallen called Pacific Islander and St George Illawarra player, Micky Paea, a 'black c..t'. Gallen was fined \$10,000 by the National Rugby League, although Paea had refused to make an official complaint about the incident (Honeysett 2009).

John Hoberman's (1997) observations of the racial physicality logic within sport in the United States have a resonance, too, in Australian rugby league. Colin and Paul Tatz, for instance, have discussed the 'natural' ability of Aboriginal rugby league players as 'black gold' (2000, pp. 198-231). A 1991 study found that Australian rugby league coaches were making selections for team positions that were consistent with racial stereotypes. These stereotypes had historically seen Aboriginal players confined to playing out on the wing, where speed and some ball skills were paramount, rather than the game's strategic positions of halfback or five-eighth, which required organising ability and discipline (Hallinan 1991, pp. 69-79). Darren Godwell (2000) critiques the idea of natural ability and asserts that Indigenous involvement in rugby league can be attributed to a positive cycle of personal application and self-confidence. Godwell (2000) argues that it is a fixed stereotype that it is their Aboriginality that gives players their sporting ability. The stereotype may be internalised by the players and seen as an obvious truth by most non-Indigenous supporters of the game. Such a view does not address the other areas of prevailing racism within the lives of Aboriginal footballers. The notion that Aborigines are good at football because they are Aboriginal does not begin to address racism, nor the racial inequities in power relations. These ideas owe more to the race science and Social Darwinism of the past.

Race, historically, is the blindside flick pass in rugby league. While there is some academic criticism, and sporadic reference to race and rugby league in the press, there is an enduring silence over the question of race in the game. One could say that there is no public voice or identity in Australia for Aborigines. The dominant whiteness of Australia and its essentially racist character, as in rugby league, is largely never questioned let alone interrogated (Ingram 2001, pp. 157-176). This was reflected in David Mellor's study (2003, p. 482) of the racism encountered in Australia by Aboriginal people:

The data indicate that the racism experienced by the Aboriginal participants is pervasive. There was substantial agreement among the interviewees that non-Aboriginal people hold negative stereotypes about Aborigines and that this is normative. These stereotypes are seen to be freely perpetuated in society by individuals and the media. In sum, these perceived stereotypes convey the message to the participants that they have no place in the "culturally superior" mainstream society.

Mellor's survey identified sport as just one of the numerous areas or activities in which Aboriginal people experienced racism in Australia on an everyday basis (2003, p. 483).

Racialised sport has become institutionally normalised.<sup>1</sup> The racially marginalised are expected to conform to the dominant whiteness of the sporting codes (Gale 2000, pp. 251-263). This question of normalised racism pervades not only rugby league but all sporting codes in Australia. Historically, Aboriginal players have been excluded from the game because of racism in the period prior to the 1960s. What permeates Australian rugby league is a politics of whiteness, which reflects a prevailing mentality of white colonial settler exclusionism. Indigenous players, even if they played representative football for Australia, are never seen as being quite 'Australian'. Prior to the 1960s, a form of exclusion on demand was enforced that effectively excluded Aboriginal people from every sphere of material life. They were seen to be separate and inferior.

In a materialist sense, the sport of rugby league before the 1960s presented young Indigenous men with the opportunity to earn money at a time when institutionalised racism excluded Aborigines from most avenues of paid work. Rugby league, like foot running and tent boxing, saw Aboriginal men receive cash in hand payments for their performance. However, payment was usually withheld if a victory was not forthcoming (Broome 1980, pp. 49-72; Corris 1980). Colin Tatz has suggested that rugby league was a working-class game that was seen as being receptive to young Aboriginal men with talent and ability. Rugby league 'has been more accessible to Aborigines than any other sport; it has certainly been the most generous of the major sports they play' (Tatz 1995, p. 188). The cash nexus did not end racial discrimination; it became more complicated in the context of organised professional sport. The virtual exclusion of most Aboriginal players from the code of rugby league before the 1960s was a reflection of the dominant social relations within Australia.

From the early 1970s, rugby league became more commercialised and corporatised at its highest levels. Full-time professionalism created opportunities for Indigenous players who were marketable in a sport that was becoming a corporate entertainment (Cottle 2008, p. 135). This period of intensified commercialisation saw an increase in the number of Aborigines playing for professional rugby league clubs. Colin Tatz (1995, p. 207) observed in the mid-1990s:

Since 1980 the number of talented Aboriginal players has virtually quadrupled. In 1987 there were between twenty-nine and thirty-two Aborigines in the senior Sydney premiership competition. Aborigines form 1.2 per cent of the New South Wales population, yet they constituted close on 9 per cent of the players in thirteen premier and reserve grade sides in Sydney. In the 1990s the numbers were higher.

With the rise in the number of Aboriginal players in all positions on the football field, the exclusionist racism of the past had ended. From the 1970s, the old blindside flick pass of race was seemingly

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<sup>1</sup> This notion is explored in the work of David Theo Goldberg. See Goldberg, D.T. 1993, *Racist Culture*, Blackwell, Oxford.

being ignored. Nevertheless, there remained a pervasive silence on the question of race and racism in rugby league, which was broken only occasionally by Indigenous footballers such as Anthony Mundine. In the contemporary era, outstanding Aboriginal players receive the highest accolades from the game, but the blindside flick pass of the racist past has now been replaced by an emphasis on the 'innate' physicality and 'natural ability' of these players. The old race flick pass has been transformed into the apparently colour-blind flick pass. Nonetheless, the dominant whiteness of Australian society cannot be drawn into question.<sup>2</sup> Racism in rugby league has barely begun to be addressed, just as racism in Australia may never be eradicated.

The question of race and rugby league has been made more complex and contradictory with the staging in February 2010 of a match to mark the second anniversary of Prime Minister Kevin Rudd's apology for the past injustices in the treatment of the nation's Aboriginal people. The match featured a National Rugby League All-Stars team against a squad called the 'Indigenous All-Stars'. The selection of the Indigenous All-Stars was viewed by many as an opportunity for remembrance of the past and to celebrate Aboriginal culture (Marshall 2010). However, the selection of the team on the basis of race could be seen as an example of 'enlightened racism' and a reinforcement of perceived racial differences.

In recent decades, the ranks of both Australian rugby league and rugby union have been swelled by players of Pacific Island descent, which has had an impact on Indigenous participation (Horton 2008). The participation of large numbers of these non-white players has seen a return to the evaluation of players in terms of racial characteristics. As Chris Valiotis (2008, pp. 141-142) has observed:

When trying to explain the large presence and success of rugby league players of Pacific Islander heritage in the National Rugby League (NRL) in recent times, popular opinion has almost exclusively focused on the physical attributes of these players. Journalists, commentators, talent scouts, club trainers, coaches and supporters are all keen to emphasise that size and brawn offer unfair advantages to Pacific Islander players that (so the argument goes) non-Pacific Islander footballers lack.

Indigenous players registered with NRL clubs in the 2009 season comprised ten per cent of those on professional contracts. In the early 1990s, Indigenous players represented twenty per cent of the total number of contracted NRL players. According to Roy Masters (2009, p. 32), NRL coaches are now selecting 'bigger, stronger Polynesians rather than quicker more agile [Indigenous] players' for their

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<sup>2</sup> For an illuminating exposition of race and silence, see Farred, G. 2004, 'Fiaca and Veron-ismo: Race and Silence in Argentine Football', *Leisure Studies*, vol. 23, no. 1, January, pp. 47-61.



squads. Polynesian players in 2009 account for nearly thirty per cent of the total number of NRL contracted players.

Australia's rugby league administration has responded to the 'Polynesian expansion' of the code by trialling new size restrictions for younger teams. In junior rugby league, weight and age measurements have been introduced 'to enable players who don't want to play against larger, heavier players to still participate in the game in a restricted team' (Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission 2006, p. 135). Like Aboriginal players, Pacific Islander footballers have been subjected to racial taunts and insults while participating in the traditionally white-dominated code of rugby league (Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission 2006, pp. 135-136).

The blindside flick of racism in rugby league leaves a crowded field of questions. Is the playing of rugby league a defensive response by Indigenous people to the problem of living in a racist Australia? Is it a form of psychic compensation for racial oppression? Does rugby league offer the possibility of achieving for Indigenous men respect through the demonstration of their athletic abilities? Does rugby league mask or mirror existing racial tensions or inequalities? Is it the anodyne illusion of racial harmony and equality? Is professional and corporate rugby league a mechanism of escape and social mobility for young Aboriginal men? Or is this, too, an ephemeral illusion? Is it now taken for granted that young Indigenous men will become temporary contracted employees in corporate rugby league? Should young Indigenous rugby league footballers be role models? If they are role models, or are expected to be so, how does this realise or reflect the possibilities and limitations of social change over the question of race? Can playing football change the nature of Australian racism? This article has attempted in a provisional way to explore the vexed question of race in Australian rugby league. The metaphor of the blindside flick has been employed to examine the changing nature of racism within that football code. As Anthony Mundine has observed about racism in rugby league in Australia, "There's been many incidents... it's been like a cancer" (Pramberg 2009).

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